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CONSIDER THIS:

#62 The New Yorker Story (J.D. Salinger, R.I.P)

Andrew Updegrove

If you cared about writing when you were growing up and are now, say, between 45 and 60, then during your formative years you likely felt an obligation to read *The New Yorker.* Or at least be able to sound like you did.

Back then, the now venerable magazine was under the direction of its second editor, William Shawn (1951 – 1987), and was still at the height of its reputation, although its powers were then already waning. In any given issue, you were apt to find the latest work of the leading authors of the day: writers like John Updike, John Cheever, Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Roth, to name a very few. Indeed, for an author, becoming a regular contributor to the pages of *The New Yorker* was synonymous with making it as a writer, period.

Under Shawn, the light fiction of the famous humorists that had graced the pages of the magazine in its first decades – authors like William Benchley, James Thurber and S.J. Perelman - was less welcome than it had been under the leadership of founding editor Harold Ross. But the magazine continued to set the industry standard for non-political, single-pane cartoons via the contributions of artists (Ross always referred to his cartoonists as "artists," and justly so) like Peter Arno, Edward Koren, William Steig and Gahan Wilson.

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The wonderful work of these artists, and the striking cover art that they and others contributed, ensured that *The New Yorker* was accessible to everyone, even if they just looked at the pictures (much like another magazine then enjoying its heyday, and paying top dollar for great cartoons by famous artists. That magazine was founded by Hugh Hefner, and was also popular with a significant percentage of the population during its formative years).

But whatever the work – whether short commentaries in the *Talk of the Town* section, new fiction by a famous author, or poetry, anything that appeared in *The New Yorker* from the very beginning was invariably knowing and sophisticated. And so it had been foretold: Harold Ross famously (and emphatically) proclaimed in the 1925 prospectus that preceded *The New Yorker's* launch that the magazine, "was not intended for the old lady in Dubuque."

Once upon a time, a roustabout named Harold Ross created a magic magazine that managed to define sophistication while remaining accessible to everyone

During the magazine's first half century, a wonderful array of staff and contributing writers made the magazine dazzle with talent and style that was not afraid to be both sly as well as sophisticated. And while Ross may have shunned the old lady in Dubuque, he never lost touch with the kind of people he rubbed elbows with and enjoyed during his roustabout youth as a cub reporter out West and his army years in France during World War I.

But under the (to me) too-precious eye of William Shawn, the magazine became perhaps too impressed with itself. Staff writers like Brendan Gill, who rode the coattails of the magazine throughout their entire career as a distinctly minor light on the literary scene, basked in the reflected glory of Shawn's refined approach. Gill fawned over Shawn to the point of embarrassment in his 1975 book, Here at the New Yorker, just one of at least 25 full-length treatments of the magazine, many by its own writers.

Gill's book was less about the magazine, though, then a paean to the joys of being Brendan Gill, and an opportunity to settle scores with (justifiably) better known literary figures than himself, such as the brilliantly witty but personally difficult James Thurber (who he labeled as "malicious") and that rube from the frontier, Harold Ross, that had hired him and for many years had paid his salary (Gill clearly believed that the unfinished Ross was unworthy to be editor of *Gill's* magazine).

But I digress. Indeed, while *The New Yorker* was a standard in its own right (I use the past tense advisedly), this essay is not about the magazine, but about a type of story that flourished under the exquisitely refined guardianship of William Shawn – a type of story that came to be called by some, "a New Yorker Story." And also about the author that perhaps did most to popularize that type of tale, before withdrawing from the scene, to observe, but not to publish, from his secluded aerie in New Hampshire.

What was a New Yorker Story? Think of any of the last works that J.D. Salinger shared with an unworthy world before he removed himself from the scene of public letters to write only for himself. Or think of a Seinfeld episode, only without the humor. Or of a shaggy dog story (as in, you can't tell one end from the other).

Indeed, the concept of a New Yorker story was intended to be as minimalist as possible, and with as little, or no, explanation for whatever identifiable conclusion (if any) might lie at the end of the piece. No *dénouement* allowed for the fiction that made Shawn's eye sparkle with editorial avarice! Instead, a typical plot line might run as follows:

> A young woman comes home to her apartment. Dreamily, she removes her coat and drops it carelessly on a chair. She stares out of her window at the bright colors of spring, reflecting on the perfection of the whirlwind relationship she is experiencing with a dashing young man she met on the streets of Paris. Never before has she known such bliss and fulfillment.
>
> Turning away from the window, she notices a single red rose in a bud vase on the table in her almost barren flat; beside it is a small note card, a had written message can be seen: *"My love for you will survive the end of the world."*
>
> Suddenly, she knows that for her, the relationship is over.

Ready to lose your lunch? Yes, I was too, back then. In fact, there were good reasons why many only read the cartoons during the Shawn years.

Perhaps we should not be too harsh on Shawn for nurturing fiction writers willing to write New Yorker stories. Those were, after all, the hay days of Truffaut and Bergman in film, and of Kandinsky, de Koonig and Pollock in art. Even in theatre, Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot was setting expectations of obscurantism never before seen on the theatre stage. And in modern symphony? Don't ask.

How could someone with Shawn's refinement, someone living in New York after all, do otherwise? Traditional fiction must have seemed hopelessly quaint and artless unless it, too, could achieve (at least) the obscure. But the unique value of *The New Yorker*, of course, had never been to mimic a museum show catalog. Its reputation had been made on providing accessible sophistication that, to the extent it took itself too seriously, was also willing to chide itself for its own self-indulgence.

Of course, the days of William Shawn are now long gone. And so, too, are the glory days of the magazine he transitioned from its peak to its present reality. A succession of editors succeeded him, and while some have wrought worthwhile

changes, the magazine has never succeeded in rescaling the heights of influence from which it once so effortlessly reigned.

Today, the single piece of fiction that appears in each issue is more accessible, but the authors whose work appears do not have the stature of those of yore. Besides its several short poems and its (still wonderful) artwork, it continues to offer worthwhile and well written reviews, and a meaningful percentage of serious work by authors like Seymour Hersh. But its effort to return to light fiction (most issues include a "Shouts and Murmurs" piece, a category resurrected from the Ross years) as resulted in a series of formulaic, and sometimes embarrassing, set pieces. And much of the regular diet of articles are about not much at all, written in the same spare prose perfected by *New Yorker* contributor John McPhee, but lacking the same Spartan wit and turn of phrase that McPhee doles out sparingly to light up an entire page of prose.

Perhaps J.D. Salinger was more prescient than eccentric, despite the long-held consensus to the contrary. After all, Shawn tried to put the inaccessible on a pedestal as proof of his, and his magazine's sophistication, and devalued *The New Yorker's* reputation in the process, losing much of its audience in the process. Salinger may have known that the public would abandon him, too, once it realized that The Catcher in the Rye was an accidentally accessible fluke that he would not be willing, or perhaps even able, to provide to them again.

Happily, we do not see much of the The New Yorker Story in *The New Yorker* anymore. But unhappily, we don't have *The New Yorker* of its glory years to look forward to each week, either.

What a shame.

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